



Culinary Tensions

Chinese Cuisine's Rocky Road toward International Intangible Cultural Heritage Status

This article focuses on the so-far unsuccessful attempts to inscribe elements of Chinese cuisine on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Food designated as heritage has sparked a heated debate among academics and heritage experts, while being embraced by state parties. In China, food-related ICH nomination initiatives have come mainly from private businesses, local governments, and the China Cuisine Association. Only recently have national-level ICH experts taken several initiatives to make Chinese culinary ICH fit the ideas of the Convention, thus making it a potential candidate for a submission to UNESCO. This article discusses different actors' ideas about food and heritage, how they conceive of culinary ICH, and for what purposes they are pursuing it. The story of Chinese food-related ICH is one of commercialization and the mushrooming cultural industry, but it is also very much a story about different understandings of the concept of ICH and provides insights into how a global concept gets localized in China and is appropriated by different governmental and non-governmental actors, to then be realigned and adapted again to fit the criteria for international inscription.

KEYWORDS: Intangible cultural heritage—UNESCO—China—food-related heritage—international governance

Designating food culture as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and inscribing it on the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (hereafter the Representative List) has become a global fad pursued by many state parties and food industries for various ends, often “gastrodiplomatic” and commercial (Bestor 2014; Cwiertka 2017). The ICH label attached to local foodways or even to an entire culinary culture represents an opportunity for states to embellish and promote “national cuisines” on a world stage, to make them visible, and to also further boost tourist industries. China has been quite enthusiastic about using ICH for various geopolitical and other purposes, currently being the country with the most elements inscribed in the Representative List.¹ China is also a country quite deservedly proud of its cuisine and culinary tradition. It certainly has one of the most global cuisines (Cheung and Wu 2002), and books have been written about the fact that one needs to understand Chinese food in order to understand Chinese culture (Hernig 2012). Despite its cultural importance, international fame, and the fact it is a source of national pride, however, Chinese food is still missing from the UNESCO lists. Against this backdrop, this article sets out to discuss and understand the current situation of culinary ICH in China, specifically investigating the multiple attempts to select an element of Chinese food culture for inclusion in the Representative List. This article is less about food or foodways per se and more about the “heritagization” of food for different purposes, including various actors’ rationales, their ideas about food and heritage, and also specifically about their conceptions of culinary ICH.

Recent years have seen an increase in academic conferences and publications on the topic of food culture and heritage, specifically regarding foodways as ICH (e.g., Brulotte and Di Giovine 2014a). Respective discussions, however, often do not sufficiently problematize the category of “food heritage.” Food heritage tends to be conflated with the idea of food culture. Food is clearly more than about the intake of sufficient calories, proteins, fats, and so on; people always “socially construct foodways that . . . do more than simply provide nutrients” (Anderson 1988, 244). Or to phrase it differently, we all need to eat, but how, what, when, where, and with whom we eat varies significantly depending on where we are and who we are with (Brulotte and Di Giovine 2014b, 1). Food and foodways can be important markers of identity; they have been inherited for generations, some-

times centuries, and are meaningful to people in a myriad of different ways. Furthermore, food is remembered—it survives through memory as much as it can also serve as a catalyst for remembering. Hence, food is always inherently cultural. In order to pass as heritage or more specifically ICH, however, it needs to be framed in specific ways that correspond to officially sanctioned standards. Hence, in this article, when I refer to and discuss “food heritage,” I do so in the more narrowly defined terms of ICH whose authoritative definition comes from the 2003 Convention, which defines it as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO 2003, Article 2). While the idea of heritage, as Laurajane Smith writes in her by now seminal text, is an authorized discourse that originated in Europe and prioritized “‘old,’ grand, monumental and aesthetically pleasing sites, buildings, places and artefacts” (2006, 11), ICH was conceived precisely to decolonize the heritage discourse from its founding “Eurocentric” perspective (Hafstein 2018). It clearly departs from previous much more rigid understandings of cultural heritage and what has been referred to as the “freeze-frame” methodology of preservation that fixes heritage in space and time (Sullivan 1993, 16). Instead, it promotes an understanding of culture that has an anthropological ring to it, regarding it as evolving, integrated, subjective, and diverse (Bortolotto 2007, 2017). Nevertheless, ICH is not a neutral category that can or should be used interchangeably with any forms of “cultural practices,” “traditional culture,” or, in this case, “food culture.” The Convention has opened up a discursive space and provided a distinct value framework to state parties and other actors, enabling them to conceive, define, and appraise existing cultural practices and traditions and, if deemed necessary and fruitful, diagnose them as ICH (Hafstein 2015, 281–82). The Convention, and with it the concept of ICH, is hence often an active agent in (re)shaping and (re)making culture. It is a form of “meta-cultural production,” as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) famously phrased it. ICH, as much as it is open to transformation and reinterpretation when it is implemented by signatory states parties (Bortolotto et al. 2020), is still profoundly informed by the international heritage discourse. This discourse is disseminated by the gatekeepers of the Convention, more indirectly through capacity-building workshops and more directly by granting or denying access to one of the UNESCO lists. In other words, the process of listing plays an instrumental role in the production of ICH.

This is something that can be observed in already existing food-related inscriptions. It began with the “gastronomic meal of the French” and was followed by several others, including “traditional Mexican cuisine,” “Mediterranean diet,” “the making and sharing of kimchi,” and “*washoku*”; the list was most recently also joined by “the art of the Neapolitan ‘Pizzaiuolo.’”² Many of the currently inscribed elements went through a process of adaptation during the preparatory phase so as to make them fit the UNESCO criteria. The French case, for instance, went through a process of “identification and purification” (Tornatore 2012, 354; Csergo 2016) during which “French food culture” turned into the “gastronomic

meal of the French.” Similar situations could be observed in Japan (Cang 2015) and also Korea, which abandoned their plans on nominating “imperial cuisines” and followed the French model in framing their respective bids in “grassroots” terms that are more compatible with the spirit of the Convention. Important in this context is also that the UNESCO Secretariat of the Convention and many ICH “believers” (Brumann 2014)—academics, heritage experts, and so on—are generally skeptical of food-related nominations, because these have tended to be top-down endeavors and state projects that at best aid businesses but defy any “real” community involvement. There exists the fear that UNESCO will be dealing with as many culinary inscriptions as there are signatory states, hereby becoming “a gastronomic court of adjudication” (Pilcher cited in Matta 2016, 341). Another often-criticized aspect is the usage of food ICH for commercial and branding purposes and the emphasis of respective nominations on what we might call “haute cuisines” and “high-culture.” “Some use the ICH label as a marker and sign of ‘quality,’” a UNESCO staff member once said to me, explaining why they are not very keen on receiving culinary nominations. This means that those preparing food bids need to be particularly meticulous in their framing of culinary ICH in terms of the spirit of the Convention and the requirements of the Secretariat.

The reconceptualization of cultural practices for the purpose of “heritagizing” (ICH) them has also been very apparent in China. After the introduction of ICH, different stakeholders (government, scholars, and “bearers” alike) have been able to get a grip on the rather indistinct notion of “folk culture,” with many cultural practices and traditions that were previously discarded as “superstitions” suddenly gaining legitimacy under the label of ICH (Gao 2014; An and Yang 2015; You 2015; Chen 2015; Xiao 2017; Chang 2017). At the same time, China’s indigenous conceptualization of ICH differs quite significantly from that of the Convention. China’s domestic ICH law from 2011, for example, repeatedly makes use of terms like “excellency,” “distinguished culture,” and “authenticity”³ (Bodolec 2012), which had deliberately been excluded from the Convention (Bortolotto 2017). This has fostered a specifically Chinese understanding of ICH, and also means that in order to be compatible with the spirit of the Convention, an element that may already be designated as and framed within the context of ICH in China needs to undergo another multifaceted process of adaptation when it is nominated for inscription in one of the UNESCO lists.

This can be clearly observed in the case of Chinese food-related ICH. Many initiatives about China preparing a food nomination have been reported in the media and discussed publicly, but none have so far been inscribed in the Representative List. The story of Chinese food ICH is one about commercialization and the mushrooming cultural industry, particularly pertaining to the uses of heritage for marketing purposes (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013). But it is also very much a story about different understandings of the concept of ICH and provides insights into how a global concept gets localized in China and is appropriated by different governmental and non-governmental actors, to then be realigned and adapted again to fit the criteria for international inscription. Food-related nomination initiatives have come mainly from private businesses, local governments and, most

importantly, from the China Cuisine Association (CCA), a commercial association for the Chinese food and catering industry. Their ideas about food-related ICH, as I will continue to discuss in this article, while being largely compatible with China's indigenous ICH framework, do not reflect the Convention in their focus on long traditions, history, exotic ingredients, and complex cooking techniques of specific dishes, which also represents one of the reasons why we are still waiting for a Chinese food-related inscription in the Representative List. At the same time, we can observe how several initiatives by ICH experts attempt to make Chinese culinary ICH fit the spirit of the Convention and thus a potential candidate for a submission to UNESCO. This process of "soft guidance" (Larsen 2013; Bortolotto 2015) has resulted in some notable changes on the part of those advocating the submission of a Chinese food element pertaining to the ways in which they frame culinary ICH.

"THE PROBLEM IS TO BE FOUND AT HOME"

Food items have been part of the domestic ICH discourse ever since China signed the Convention in 2004 and the ICH concept became domestically operational. Chefs, the food industry, restaurants, hotels, and local governments have since been enthusiastically trying to inscribe a plethora of elements in one of China's domestic inventories. There are currently over sixty food-related items inscribed on the national-level list (Cheng and Yu 2015, 123), ranging from regional cuisines, dishes, and cooking techniques, to very specific products. Going down the administrative scales to the provincial, city, and county levels, we find an even greater number of culinary items on respective inventories.

The question of when and how a culinary element might be inscribed on the Representative List has featured prominently in Chinese domestic media and public discussions. But the Chinese state in the form of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and its subordinate ICH Department as well as ICH experts have been quite hesitant about a culinary nomination. This makes the case in China differ from other already successfully inscribed food elements that were backed and often initiated by private industries but simultaneously supported by national governments. In France, for instance, it was president Sarkozy who officially backed the project of inscribing the French gastronomic meal (Tornatore 2012). The Peruvian cuisine bid was unsuccessful, but the attempt was also mainly a government-driven initiative that omitted the voices of the people (Matta 2016). Similar situations could be observed with regards to Japan (Cang 2015) and Korea (Cho 2013; Bulut 2015).

In China, however, experts or officials mostly answered the question of culinary ICH with a shake of the head. "No chance," "too difficult," or "it's not impossible, but the question is how it's done" were comments in reaction to me bringing up the topic of a food nomination for UNESCO. A civil servant at the ICH Department said: "I know why you pay attention to this. It is because the French Gastronomic Meal has been selected; since then, many Chinese people think that China should also have it. Every year just before March 31,⁴ everyone looks at us, wants to know what we submit. There is a lot of public pressure on the government."

Indeed, since China's two neighbors and in a sense regional rivals Korea and Japan already have elements of their foodways on the list, the absence of Chinese food-related elements has repeatedly been met with astonishment, discontent, and occasionally even defiance. "We may not be part of world ICH, but we can still be proud that we are in China, this culinary heaven where one can indulge in delicacies every day, always better than eating Kimchi or Sushi every single day" (Anon. 2016). I came across many such comments during fieldwork. Simply looking at the past three to four years, many articles or online discussions appeared with titles like: "That Chinese Cuisine Has Not Yet Been Designated as ICH Is a Real Shame for the Culinary World" (@haixia-tv 2017); "Why Chinese food Culture Cannot Enter the World Intangible Cultural Heritage List" (Chen 2017); "Kimchi and Washoku Have Successfully Become ICH, Which Dishes Should China Pick?" (Wang 2014); "China Cuisine Association: Chinese Cuisine Will Be Submitted Quickly in 2015 to Avoid Other Countries Taking It Away" (Zeng 2014); and "How Can Chinese Food Enter the ICH List: These Questions Are Worth Considering" (@feiyibaohu2016 2017). The main driving force behind and strongest lobbyist in favor of a culinary nomination by China has been the CCA.

The first time I met Mr. Wang⁵ of the CCA was in May 2017 in his office. He started the conversation by showing me three notebooks. "One contains communication with local CCA presidents; one is for my work with chefs; and the last one is entirely for ICH." Mr. Wang emphasized several times how much he cared about ICH and that he had been paying attention to it since 2008.

Getting this ICH label is like an exam for us that we must complete with 100 points. Everything we do, all our efforts are going into achieving this result. And only if we achieve it can we face our father (laughs). Our father refers to all Chinese people. How can I face all Chinese people? If Chinese cuisine, after so many years, still doesn't get ICH status, then I cannot face them.

(Interview with the author, Beijing, May 2017)

This is how he explained his current dilemma. The CCA has spared no efforts in trying to spread the discourse on culinary ICH among decision-makers and the general public. They have presented several cases for nominating Chinese cuisine at China's *Liang hui*, referring to the annual plenary sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference (CPPCC). In 2017, for instance, sixteen chefs put forward the "Recommendation on putting the inscription of Chinese food as ICH on the agenda as a national strategy," in which the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Education were called upon to work together toward a Chinese culinary bid. Examples of food ICH elements from around the world were listed as important models and guidelines but also as a subtle way to evoke a sense of urgency among Central-level officials. The economic benefits that the inscription of food could bring about were specifically emphasized. However, to use the words of Mr. Wang, "our requests were always politely rejected."

To circumvent official bureaucratic channels and push for a food nomination, the CCA has also several times taken charge of preparing banquets for UNESCO staff when they were in China for official visits or at the respective headquarters of

UNESCO in Paris or the UN in New York. In March 2015, around twenty famous Chinese chefs went to UNESCO headquarters to hold a food-tasting session (@ Feiyi Baohu 2017). Mr. Wang told me that during their visit to Paris, UNESCO representatives all conveyed to him how delicious Chinese food was and that inscribing it on the Representative List should pose no significant problem. The former director-general of UNESCO was also once invited by the CCA. “When she was in Beijing,” Mr. Wang recounted, “we made food for her and a delegation and she said: very delicious. Definitely 100 points.” So Mr. Wang eventually concluded that the recognition of Chinese food already exists at the international level; “the real problem,” he said to me, “is to be found at home.”

Indeed, a main problem for the CCA has been that, as a so-called commercial association, it is registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and is now managed by the Ministry of Commerce, not the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. As a result, there existed no official channels for the CCA to directly contact or discuss matters with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. An internal ICH report prepared by the CCA states: “our Association has no means to officially enter into a dialogue with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The ICH Department only evaluates the reports that we submit and possesses veto power.” The Ministry of Commerce, however, according to Mr. Wang, “is not interested in culture” and thus not willing to build a bridge between the CCA and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Only once, after the failed first bid, did the CCA manage to set up an official meeting with the ICH Department. This is how Mr. Wang recounted the meeting: “they told me that they are happy that the CCA officially takes up the role of preparing the culinary ICH bid for China. But they also told me that I should be patient, that there are 11 elements waiting to be submitted first. 11 elements! That means food will be inscribed in 24 years. I will be over 80 years old by then.” But apart from these administrative obstacles, a key problem and reason for the reluctance and unresponsiveness of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to support a culinary nomination has been how respective food-related ICH elements were conceived of. To further understand this, we need to look more closely at the ways in which the CCA and other food nomination advocates frame ICH and also what their rationales are.

TASTE, SKILL, TRADITION, AND BRANDING

In 2011, right after the inscription of the “French gastronomic meal,” the CCA put together the first formal application form for an element entitled “Chinese cooking skills” (*zhongguo peng ren ji fa*). They gathered around one hundred “representative ways of Chinese cooking,” of which thirty-five were selected and included in the bid. The nominated practicing community were “professional chefs” (Cheng 2014; Zhou 2017). However, the prepared application form, to use the words of Mr. Wang, “was directly returned by the experts at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, because there existed a whole series of technical problems, our application didn’t conform with the

requirements. We were asked to do it again.” Among other mistakes, the application form exceeded the word limit and contained many incorrect terms.

A second attempt was envisioned between 2014 and 2015, this time using a selection of dishes from China’s “eight major cuisines” (*ba da cai*).⁶ The idea was to not use or try to represent “Chinese cuisine” as a whole but to select certain aspects of it in the form of specific dishes.⁷

At the time, I looked at already existing culinary ICH elements, like the Mediterranean diet, French food, Mexican cuisine, and Kimchi. I really felt that we had to hurry. I had been working in the food industry for so many years. So I felt under even more pressure. I believe that Chinese cuisine has the strength, it can compare with others, it should be part of the world ICH list.

(Interview with the author, Beijing, May 2017)

Further, he said that “we came to understand that we should not only focus on cooking skills but more on the history and meaning of dishes. This is how Kimchi was so successful.” Despite the narrower focus on specific dishes, this second attempt never turned into a fully fleshed-out application and was eventually scrapped. Another culinary nomination for the culture of dumpling (*jiao zi*) eating was envisioned in 2017, but, as Mr. Wang conveyed to me, no concrete measures were taken.

In addition to the above initiatives by the CCA, other enthusiastic individuals and local governments also tried to find ways to brand their culinary products by announcing that a bid for submission to UNESCO would be under way. In autumn 2015, for example, several domestic and international media reported on China preparing a bid for Confucian Family Cuisine (*kong fu cai*) to be submitted for inclusion in the Representative List (cf. “Confucian Cuisine: Just Add Sage” 2016). Curious about the news, but also somewhat bewildered by the fact that I had never heard of Confucian Family Cuisine, I went to Qufu, the hometown of Confucius, to find out more about the case. Confucian Family Cuisine is categorized as one of China’s main “official cuisines” (*guan fu cai*), which refer to often extravagant dishes and banquets prepared by special “government chefs” exclusively for government officials during Imperial times, mainly since the late Ming / early Qing period (16th or 17th centuries). Confucian Family Cuisine belongs to the same category but developed in Shandong province when emperors and other important and high-ranking officials and people visited Qufu to pay tribute to Confucius. His family would then welcome and entertain them with lavish banquets, especially prepared by so-called “outer-chefs.”⁸ Confucian Family Cuisine, as it is generally presented today, is based on the records kept by chefs and that have allegedly been passed down for the past two thousand years. Moreover, it is also based on the culinary wisdom put forward by Confucius himself, mainly in one of his key texts, the “Analects.” A leading Chinese scholar on Confucian cuisine, Zhao Rongguang, who had been consulted for this ICH nomination, summarizes Confucius’ “culinary wisdom” as follows: “Food and drinks have to be exquisite, prepared and cooked to perfection, one should eat regularly and follow rituals, one should not overindulge, pay attention to hygiene, to nutrition, and strictly abide by the culinary culture” (Zhao 2007, 62). It is generally contested, however, as to what precisely constitutes Confucian Family Cuisine in terms of

specific dishes. Eugene Anderson (1988, 197), for instance, points out that Confucius left comments on food and manners but did not give us much of an idea of what was served.

The initiative was launched and pushed forward by private entrepreneurs, specifically hotel managers in and around Qufu, the hometown of Confucius, together with the local Shandong branch of the Cuisine Association and city-level officials. The preparation of the application and subsequent submission to UNESCO was presented and portrayed in the media as if it was coming from China, even though in reality the Ministry of Culture and Tourism had no stakes in this case. Experts and national-level officials even distanced themselves from the project, discarding it as the attempt of local businesses playing for the gallery and wanting a bit of show and fame. So we can quite safely say that Confucian Family Cuisine does not stand much chance of being submitted.

In the described cases, we can discern many misunderstandings pertaining to what ICH constitutes and how the global ICH bureaucracy works. Even in official documents and correspondence the term “World ICH” was deployed to refer to the UNESCO lists. This conflation of the notion of “World Heritage” with “ICH” is very common and reflects a deeper misperception of the purpose and nature of ICH (cf. “Le camembert” 2017). Moreover, rather than focusing on culinary practices of specific communities or the meanings behind foodways, food ICH was generally understood in terms of specific dishes, tastes, and cooking skills. One comment that I heard the most during fieldwork was “China is simply too big, its food culture is too vast. How do we decide which aspect of it to pick for a nomination?” An official at the ICH Department concluded: “Look at Kimchi. It is relatively simple. But Chinese forms of cooking are so manifold. Plus, China is a multi-ethnic nation. It is very complicated.” An ICH expert said, “if you pick a cuisine from that region, people from another region will be unhappy. So it is very difficult to choose one that everyone can live with.”

In official and popular discourse, Chinese regional cuisines are divided into four or eight major cuisines, respectively.⁹ Such classifications are evidently not unproblematic, and transitions are gradual and overlapping (Anderson 1988, chap. 10; Zhao 2015, 50; Cheung 2002). There exists a pronounced sense of culinary localism in China. I myself have been introduced to “real” Chinese food and “proper” eating etiquette many times in different contexts. Ingredients, ways of cooking, knowledge about food, and foodways all differ quite significantly between regions. The most obvious is the north-south dietary divide, with the largely wheat- and grain-based diet in the north and the rice-based diet in the south (and center). So when the CCA suggested to nominate Chinese New Year dinner, particularly the culture of eating dumplings, southerners would rightly point to the fact that in the south, one does not eat wheat-based and savory dumplings for Spring Festival but *tang yuan*, which are glutinous rice balls served in sweet syrup. When I raised this with Mr. Wang, he acknowledged this fact but argued that “most people do have the tradition of eating dumplings during Spring Festival,” apparently trying to reduce China’s culinary fractions to a lowest common denominator. The French gastronomic meal was arguably successful because the bid refrained from empha-

sizing specific dishes (Sammells 2014). A similar strategy was adopted by Japan (Cang 2015), and Korea also focused on the meaning of Kimchi and less on the actual dish itself. In most of my encounters with members of the CCA, chefs, or food enthusiasts in China, however, discussions still largely revolved around food items and the dishes themselves. In the end, it was always about finding a suitable set of dishes that can represent Chinese cuisine as a whole.

Moreover, many of my interlocutors appealed to the taste and fame of Chinese cooking. Similar to Mr. Wang's statement about how UNESCO's former director-general highly praised Chinese food, the starting point of many discussions about why Chinese food should be inscribed in the Representative List was that "it is just so delicious." Taste itself seemed to be reason and justification enough for Chinese food to become UNESCO-inscribed ICH. Media reports and online discussions have also focused attention on the fact that Chinese food is so extraordinarily popular abroad. "In the US, people prefer Chinese food to Japanese or Korean food," a CCA report stated. CCA staff and chefs generally championed the extraordinary complexity of Chinese food and technical expertise that is required to make it. After the first application prepared by the CCA was rejected by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the president of the CCA was quoted in a media article explaining his interpretation of the problem:

[t]he system of Chinese traditional cooking skills is so vast and comprehensive that it is difficult to truly represent and communicate to international audiences. According to professional classifications, there exist 35 broad cooking skill categories; but simply the category of "deep-frying" already includes seven or eight different methods, so not even Chinese people, let alone foreigners can fully understand it! (Wang 2014)

ICH here is erroneously presented as being about complicated cooking skills and understanding of how to make a dish. This perception and presentation was not uncommon. During fieldwork, I found myself being invited to extravagant dinners numerous times. Each time, the head chef would be called to the table to explain the special cooking techniques that were required to make such fancy food. When I met the head of a local branch of the CCA in Zhejiang Province in late July 2017, at the beginning of our conversation he pondered over the question of how one distinguishes between what does and does not count as ICH. "We need to find a definition for foods that are simply traditions and foods that are ICH," he said. Later during lunch, he repeatedly came up with his own definitions. According to him, a specific dish had to require a specific cooking skill and it had to be *yuán zhī yuán wèi* (lit. "original juice and taste") in order to classify as ICH. Traditions and a long history were aspects that were repeatedly emphasized and taken as key markers of ICH. "From a simple piece of meat that is being cooked on an open fire to this extraordinarily beautiful dish that we have today, we have this great tradition, this great inheritance that we really think deserves to be recognized," Mr. Wang once stated, explaining once again why Chinese food should be granted the UNESCO ICH label.

It is true that food is always tangible and that everything that may be considered intangible (ideas, knowledge, stories behind food) eventually becomes real

and physical through prepared and consumed food (Anderson 2013, 3). However, ICH is by definition always “embodied in people rather than in inanimate objects” (Logan cited in Silverman and Ruggles 2009, 1). In the case of culinary ICH, the embodied culinary practice of preparing a meal and the embodied culinary experience of eating can both be subject to the label of ICH. In China, however, there clearly exists an overemphasis on the embodied practice of making food, while the embodied experience of eating is often neglected.

The way food ICH is conceived in China also exudes a sense of elitism and an aura of “haute cuisine.” This is reflected in the terminology. In Chinese, there are two terms for food-related ICH: *yin shi fei yi* and *mei shi fei yi*. The former is a more neutral term, simply referring to “food and drink ICH,” while the latter connotes the idea of ICH as “good food” or “delicacies.” CCA members and chefs tended to use *mei shi fei yi* when they talked about food-related ICH. This reflects a general perception of food culture in China. Xiaomin Cheng (2014, 2), for instance, remarks that “Chinese food culture has always been about . . . being the best, about famous dishes, famous chefs, famous restaurants, famous brands . . . when performing and exhibiting Chinese food culture, it is also always about amazing skills, rare ingredients and extravagant dishes, which has heavily influenced the public discourse.” On the other hand, Mr. Wang explained to me: “The problem of Chinese food is that it is not considered art. Food is not culture! We eat everyday, there’s nothing special about that. It is not like thangka drawings or other endangered cultural practices. Food exists every day, it won’t disappear, it is not endangered. So it isn’t considered culture.” He added his own solution: “so we need to have star chefs who make high-quality dishes. Cooking has to become an art. The problem is that at the moment, only those who don’t like to study decide to become chefs. It is a low-level career. We need to change that.” This comment is interesting in several ways. It clearly reinforces the erroneous perception that things have to become “art” or “high culture” in order to be considered “culture” or ICH. But it also implicitly discredits the ordinary and mundane practice of preparing and consuming food, in other words, precisely the aspects of culinary culture that could more easily qualify as ICH.

Finally, the commercial aspect of food ICH deserves some attention. Simply looking at the special shops selling “Dezhou Braised Chicken” advertising their products with large signs reading “National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage” hints at the reasons and rationales behind the pursuit of ICH status. The very first food item to be inscribed on the national list, Cantonese herbal “cooling tea,” sparked some controversy because the inscription came at a moment when the company producing the tea was taken to court, being accused of illegally claiming the medicinal efficacies of the drink and of posing a health hazard. The ICH designation and corresponding legal validation of its ingredients being traditional solved the issue and enabled the company to declare the tea as safe and medicinal without further endorsement from biomedicine (Liang 2013). It was thus criticized because it appeared that ICH inscription was merely about sales.

Another example comes from the “International ICH Expo” in Chengdu during China’s international ICH festival in 2017, where I ventured into a section

designated for culinary heritage. It was a small alleyway lined with tightly arranged stalls offering delicacies from all across China that exuded the atmosphere of a wet market. The vendors pitched their products by shouting at full throat or through megaphones, with huge signs, textual evidence of their products' history and tradition, and by performing on site the making of food items. In a little tent, I tasted a local and, according to the salesman, traditional kiwi liquor. The company was a family business, and the art of making the liquor had allegedly been passed down for several generations. The company had not been able to apply for official ICH status within China. When I asked why they were interested in it, the salesman answered: "we want this as a recognition. And it will make it easier to sell our liquor nation-wide."

The previously described case of Confucian Family Cuisine is also a typical example of trying to use the UNESCO ICH label for commercial and marketing purposes and as a marker of authenticity. It also reflects some general themes and fundamental problems with regards to culinary ICH elements in China: the selection of "haute cuisine," of something fancy and extravagant that has very little to do with the daily culinary practices and livelihoods of contemporary communities as well as the focus on long tradition, history, exotic ingredients, and complex cooking skills and techniques.

REALIGNING CULINARY ICH

From these cases, we see that UNESCO's concerns about food nominations are precisely reflected in China's manifestations of culinary ICH. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism is aware of this problem, as an official at the ICH Department explained to me: "the problem lies within the fact that food professionals may be very familiar with their trade, but the way they think of ICH is not easily reconcilable with the Convention. They tell you how well they pull noodles, how exquisitely they prepare their dishes. But what is the culture behind all this?" So the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's lack of support for a food nomination can be regarded as a result of a simple cost-benefit analysis. "We only have such a limited quota, we need to make sure that our nominations are accepted." This is what an ICH official conveyed to me. It is indeed true that each ICH quota is valuable, and that failed submissions, such as the Torch Festival of the Yi minority that was rejected in 2014, must be avoided.

At the same time, the emphasis on cooking skills rather than the meanings behind foodways or the culinary practices mirrors China's indigenous take on ICH (Zhang and Zhou 2017). China's domestic ICH law from 2011 is largely modeled on the UNESCO Convention, but also differs from it in terms of some key ideas pertaining to ICH. The very first article, for instance, stipulates that the law exists for the purpose of "inheriting and promoting the distinguished traditional culture of the Chinese nation" (State Council 2011, Article 1). Article 4 specifically details that "when protecting intangible cultural heritage, focus shall be laid on its authenticity . . ." (State Council 2011, Article 4). The focus on "distinguished culture" has further been spurred by President Xi Jinping's rhetoric of the need to

“develop China’s excellent traditional culture” (Renmin Wang 2017) and, more recently, by an “opinion on implementing the transmission and development of excellent Chinese culture project” put forward during the 19th National Congress in October 2017 (@Hanmochufeng 2017). This discourse allows ICH to flourish domestically but in turn also demarcates it from the principles of the Convention. Ideas about ICH being about authenticity and “excellency” clearly also prevail in China’s food elements. Moreover, within China’s ten categories under which all ICH elements are grouped,¹⁰ none exists for food, which is why most domestically inscribed food elements are found under the “traditional handicraft skills” category. So in addition to the general discourse on ICH being about authenticity and cultural excellence, food ICH is hereby implicitly classified as being about the embodied practice of preparing a dish, rather than the cultural practices, meanings, and expressions revolving around its consumption.

More recently, however, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has begun to show an active interest in food-related ICH. There are signs that the rejection is slowly turning into support and that a process to realign Chinese food ICH to the ideas of the Convention has started. Since summer 2018, several workshops and meetings have been held during which people from the food sector (chefs, CCA representatives) and ICH experts came together. Lectures on the meanings and ideas of ICH in the Convention were given, and a different, “correct,” understanding of ICH was fostered. A new element is now being considered for submission to UNESCO, namely that of “Chinese New Year Dinner” (*nian ye fan*). The exact reasons for this sudden change can only be speculated on, and no concrete details exist on what the bid might entail. But the prominent inscription of “the art of the Neapolitan ‘Pizzaiuolo’” on the Representative List in 2017 may have played a role. According to my interlocutor, Mr. Wang, the CCA’s persistence in pushing for a food nomination had also finally borne fruit. When I met him again in the summer of 2018, he was very excited, speaking of major breakthroughs and improvements. In August, a “Chinese culinary ICH safeguarding and transmission project group” was convened, consisting of experts, scholars, and officials, and the CCA had been officially designated as the responsible unit for the safeguarding of Chinese culinary ICH. “The government has entrusted us with a great responsibility,” Mr. Wang told me.

Interesting were the subtle, yet noticeable changes in his understanding and framing of ICH:

Originally, we only paid attention to international inscription; but we came to understand that inscription is only one small detail in the larger safeguarding and transmission process. They (the Ministry of Culture and Tourism) will do the application work, we will take care of the promotion, enhancement, and safeguarding of culinary ICH at home.

(Interview with the author, Beijing, August 2018)

The way Mr. Wang talked about culinary ICH had changed quite significantly compared to one year before. During our conversation, Mr. Wang corrected himself several times after accidentally using the notion of *mei shi fei yi*. The official

term to refer to food-related ICH in Chinese has now been set as *yin shi fei yi*. Also, in the texts produced by the CCA, the Representative List is no longer referred to as “World ICH,” but as “ICH of Humanity.” Moreover, several projects were underway, as he told me. Underneath the previously mentioned “Chinese culinary ICH safeguarding and transmission project group,” each province was to now set up a sub-project group. Mr. Wang decided that these should be based at universities, “because they don’t have any economic interests; if businesses get involved, everything would be about profit,” he explained. Mr. Wang also refrained from referring to the techniques, skills, and tradition of dishes. Instead, he deliberately played up the “meaning” and “folklore” of food. “Chinese New Year’s Dinner is about cultural practices of all Chinese people, regardless of what kind of food is actually served,” he said. As we see, ICH was now less about the complexity of making a certain dish and more about the cultural practices revolving around food consumption. ICH inscription was also no longer about “promoting Chinese food around the world,” as it used to be portrayed in previous reports and meetings, but about local practices and traditions at home.

We learn from this that a process to realign food ICH to the ideas of the Convention and prepare it for a potential submission to UNESCO has been launched. There are currently signs that through forms of “soft guidance” (Larsen 2013) by ICH experts and scholars working for the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, people like Mr. Wang are changing their ideas of how a culinary ICH element has to be framed in order to be accepted first by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and then by UNESCO. So far, the process of what we might call “coming to understand ICH” is still at a very early stage, and whether and to what extent different actors advocating for a culinary nomination in China are going to adopt these new ideas on ICH remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

Chinese cuisine finds itself on a rocky road when it comes to UNESCO-inscribed ICH status. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has, until very recently, not been very supportive of and responsive to the CCA’s and other attempts to put together an application. The CCA’s efforts were rejected on the basis of faulty technicalities of application forms and wrong usage of terminology as well as normative waiting lists. Only recently has the Ministry of Culture and Tourism shown support of culinary ICH and signaled the potential for a related submission. The case of culinary ICH is interesting, as it highlights the tensions that exist within China pertaining to different understandings of ICH. On the one hand, there is the food industry, the CCA, restaurants, and businesses that want to capitalize on and benefit from the ICH label and thus push for a UNESCO submission. Their understandings of food ICH diverge significantly from the Convention but simultaneously resonate with China’s indigenous ICH regime, based on its law and the general discourse on excellent culture. On the other hand, there is the Ministry of Culture and Tourism that is responsible for submitting nominations to UNESCO and thus is chiefly concerned about disseminating “correct” definitions and

notions of ICH as stipulated by the Convention with the aim to realign respective Chinese elements and make them potential candidates for inscription in the Representative List. This represents a difficulty, and much effort is required to reconcile these two quite different and often contradicting understandings.

So the story of culinary ICH in China is one that provides insights into how a global concept gets interpreted, appropriated, and localized in China at different scales and by different governmental and non-governmental actors. It reveals part of the process by which an international Convention gets substantiated through its implementation (Bortolotto 2013). But hereby it also raises questions about the ways in which the Convention is operationalized and in what capacity various actors participate in the making and framing of ICH elements. The case of food-related ICH shows how a process of realignment attunes practitioners and ICH advocates from within the food industry to the ideas of the Convention. The CCA has been attempting to prepare a food element for China, constantly making efforts to understand ICH. But only very recently, after the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has begun to broker between the food and ICH realms, have their ideas on culinary ICH really started to change. Whether this change is going to be accepted on a larger scale remains to be seen. It may very well be regarded as merely a strategic move to camouflage “real” intentions. Clare Sammells (2014, 154–55), for instance, makes the important point that some cuisines included in the Representative List are already internationally recognized. In such cases, it is precisely the “traditional” that is demonstrated and highlighted in nominations, hereby grounding and “localizing” national cuisines, turning them into “haute traditional cuisines” and making them marketable globally as “local cuisines” (Sammells 2014, 141–42). My interlocutor’s changing understanding of culinary ICH clearly reflects a shift away from national culture toward a focus on local culture, but this may simply reveal the realization that within the realm of ICH, one needs to become local first in order to become global.

The criticism that is often brought forward is that projects to nominate an ICH element such as the one presented here are chiefly about global fame and economic gains, and that they thereby compromise the original goal of the Convention, which is to safeguard local cultural practices. However, the intentions for wanting to be inscribed in the Representative List are necessarily manifold, and an international heritage system in which ICH elements become significant through list membership inevitably gives rise to considerations of international prestige and related economic gain on the part of those who pursue ICH status. Political-economic rationales are, after all, also often what drive the state to engage with and support certain ICH elements. In conclusion, it thus is not and cannot be the aim of this article to conclusively pass judgment on the “genuineness” of someone’s pursuit of ICH. Also, the intent to be inscribed on the Representative List will most likely be preceded by an awareness of its global implication and national image-making. So it is probably impossible to conceive of the process of international ICH nominations in isolated local terms. However, this is not to say that successful inscription in the Representative List or even a discourse revolving around a nomination may not also open up discursive spaces that legitimize cultural expres-

sions at the local level. Future research may indeed focus on whether and how the recently changing discourses revolving around food-related ICH in China and even a potential inscription might play out and impact food culture at the local level.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research leading to the present results has received financial support from the EHESS for the research project “UNESCO Friction: Heritage-Making across Global Governance,” with a grant generously provided by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (UNESCO FRICTIONS – ANR-14-ACHN-0006-01). I thank Chiara Bortolotto, Panas Karampampas, and Simone Toji for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I also thank the editors of the special issue for the time and great work that they have put into making this possible.

NOTES

1. As of March 2020 China has a total of forty elements inscribed on all three UNESCO lists.
2. The most prominent and often discussed food and drink elements on the Representative List are the gastronomic meal of the French; traditional Mexican cuisine; the Mediterranean diet (Spain, Italy, Greece, Morocco 2010; Cyprus, Croatia, Portugal 2013); gingerbread craft from Northern Croatia (Croatia); ceremonial Keşkek tradition (Turkey); *washoku*, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year (Japan); *kimjang*, making and sharing kimchi in the Republic of Korea; Turkish coffee culture and tradition (Turkey); Ancient Georgian traditional Qvevri wine-making method (Georgia); lavash, the preparation, meaning, and appearance of traditional bread as an expression of culture in Armenia (Armenia); beer culture in Belgian (Belgium); and flatbread making and sharing culture: lavash, *katryma*, *jupka*, *yufka* (Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey).
3. The 2003 Convention deliberately refrains from using the notion of authenticity to demarcate it from World Heritage, but also to reinforce the fact that ICH is by definition dynamic and changing. China’s own understandings of ICH, particularly by food ICH advocates, thus differs significantly from the idea put forward in the Convention.
4. This is the annual deadline for countries to submit their nominations to UNESCO.
5. Pseudonym.
6. The “eight major cuisines” are Anhui, Cantonese, Fujian, Hunan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Sichuan, and Zhejiang cuisines.

7. This time, a few specific dishes were picked, including Cantonese roast duck (*Guang shi shao ya*), steamed fish fans with chopped chili pepper (*Duo ka zheng yu shan*), fragrant almond prawn sticks (*Xing xiang xia pai*), crispy garlic chicken wings (*Suan xiang ji chi*), five-spice flavored lamb cake (*Wu xiang dong yang gao*), Yangzhou fried rice (*Yangzhou chao fan*), and Wensi tofu soup (*Wen si dou fu*).

8. Traditionally, there existed so-called “inner chefs” (*nei chu*) and “outer chefs” (*wai chu*). The inner chefs prepared food for the immediate family members and for the court, whereas the outer chefs were responsible for preparing food for distinguished guests.

9. The four cuisines emerged out of a north-south divide, with the northern cuisine (Shandong) being grouped as (roughly) one and the southern cuisines divided into east, west, and south (Jiangsu, Sichuan, and Cantonese). Later, they were refined based on cooking methods, ingredients, environment, and so on (mainly within the center and east), and it became common to speak of the “eight major cuisines.” However, such classifications are evidently not unproblematic and are inadequate for a UNESCO bid that claims to represent “Chinese food.”

10. Folk literature, folk music, folk dance, traditional drama or opera, recitative story-telling, acrobatics and sports, folk art, traditional handicraft skills, traditional medicine, and folklore.

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